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ABSTRACT

Investigating the use of content journals--notebooks in which students record their ideas about studies in a particular subject area--to incorporate writing in content classes, a study examined the attitudes of seventh and eighth grade students toward low-structure (students choose what they want to write) and high-structure (teachers make specific assignments for entries) content journals. In a seventh grade social studies class, 23 students wrote in low-structure content journals for five to ten minutes several times a week throughout the 1986-87 school year. High-structure content journals were used in an eighth grade science class of 26 students, writing on specific assignments for the same time period. In the final month of school, a 10-statement attitude survey was administered in which students were asked to agree or disagree with five positive and five negative statements concerning content journals. In addition to the attitude survey, three open-ended sentence stems were given to further assess students' attitudes. Results showed that the low-structure group was more positive than the high-structure group about the journals. However, the high-structure group reported the journal as enhancing learning while the low-structure group viewed journals as providing an opportunity to express personal opinions. (An attitude survey and five references are appended.) (MM)

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Attitudes of Middle School Students Toward Low-Structure and High-Structure Content Journals

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Attitudes of Middle School Students Toward Low-Structure

and

High-Structure Content Journals

Much has been written about the importance of children writing in school. Special attention has recently been given to writing in the content areas. Lehr (1980) suggests that writing in subject areas gives students a way to explore new information, make relationships, and to clarify their thinking. Teachers can learn about their children's prior knowledge, their feelings, and their understanding of the content of the class. Writing can be incorporated in content classes in several ways; a content journal (learning log or thought book) is reported to be one of the most effective means of involving students in meaningful writing (Fulwiler, 1980; Yinger & Clark, 1981; Vacca & Vacca, 1986).

A content journal, according to Moore, et. al. (1986), is a notebook in which students record their ideas about what is being studied in a particular subject area. They discuss two types of journals: low-structure and high-structure. If students have control over what they are writing and how they write it, the journals are said to be low-structure. On the other hand, if students are assigned specific writing topics or are asked to respond to specific questions, the journals are said to be high in structure.

Content journals are especially important in middle schools where content information becomes increasingly more complex than in the elementary school. There is much support in the literature for writing in the content areas and especially for writing in journals. No research, however, was found that examined students' attitudes toward content journals. The question we attempted to answer in this study was: What are the attitudes of seventh and

eighth-grade students who have written content journals in science and social studies?

Procedure

This study took place during the 1986-87 school year in two middle school classrooms: one seventh grade social studies class and an eighth grade science class. In the seventh grade social studies class (n=23), the teacher used low structure journals, i.e., the children chose what they wanted to put in their journals. In the eighth grade science class (n=26), the teacher used high-structure journals; the teacher made specific assignments for the journal entries. Both classes wrote in their journals for five to ten minutes several times a week throughout the school year.

In the last month of school, a ten statement researcher-developed attitude survey was administered. One-half of the items were positive statements about writing in journals; the other half were negative. The statements were simple ones such as "I learn more about the subject when I write in a content journal," or "Writing in a content journal is boring." The students were asked to agree or disagree with each of the ten items. We calculated all students' responses to obtain a total percentage score for each of the two classes.

In addition to the ten-item attitude survey, three open-ended sentence stems were given to further assess students' attitudes toward writing in journals. The three completion statements were: (1) The best thing about writing in a content journal is...; (2) the worst thing about doing journal writing is...; and (3) My opinion about writing in a content journal is... Students' responses to the sentence stems were analyzed and placed into

broad categories. The categories and responses will be discussed as we describe the results of this study.

Results

The objective of this study was to assess and describe students' attitudes toward content journals in two middle school subject area classes where students were required to write in journals several times each week. We report the results separately for each class and then compare the attitudes of students toward the two types of journal writing.

Eighth-Grade Science Class

The eighth grade science teacher used high-structure content journals; the children made entries at least three times per week. The students were asked to respond to specific questions or directives related to the subject matter being studied. For example, on a field trip to a water fall in a state park, the teacher gave these directions for the students' journal entries: "Observe the falls from the feeder source, the mouth, and the area past the falls and, (1) Write about the falls for someone who has never seen them before and, (2) Describe the scene to someone who is blind."

In response to the teacher's directions, one student wrote, "The trees surrounding the falls kind of smelled like a few days before Christmas, and the water that was falling over the rocks sounded like turning the water pressure on real high and then something at the bottom of it was hit when it fell and made a big puddle." Another child wrote, "The falls are white with sudsy-like white stuff. They are very high up. They have a big wall that controls the water right before the falls and this is where the water comes from. It sounds like water running in a song but much louder. It feels like a hard rain that is very cold."

When student responses were not specific enough, the teacher asked then to observe more closely and helped them with their observations. The child would then rewrite or make a supplementary entry. This teacher said the journal method gave her another tool to guide her students toward improved self-expression, thinking, and observation.

The results of the eighth-grade attitude survey reveal that 51.5% of the children's responses toward content journals were positive. The children were divided almost equally in their attitudes.

The responses to the three open-ended items gave more information than was obtained from the attitude survey. The students' responses were organized into categories. The largest category, 61.5% (16), for "The best thing about writing in content journals is..." related to learning when writing in content journals. For example, one student said, "if you forget what you have learned, you can look back." Another student wrote, "I can understand more about the subject that we are studying if I can write about what it means." Several students, 15.4% (4), said the best thing about writing in content journals was that they could express their personal opinions about content or the class. For instance, a student wrote, "it helps you to express feelings about the things we do in class."

The responses to the item, The worst thing about writing in content journals is...," again resulted in several categories: not liking to write, 38.5% (10); writer's block, 19.2% (5); not liking the subject they were writing about at the time, 11.5% (3); and the amount of time taken for writing, 7.7% (2). For example, in the first category a student wrote, "I get bored writing a lot." Another wrote, "I don't like to write." Writer's block was evident in responses such as, "sometimes I can't think of anything to put," and "when you aren't in the mood, you can't think of anything to write."

The resposes to the item, "My opinion about writing in content journals is..." resulted in three categories: Students who were positive toward content journals, 38.5% (10); students who were negative toward the journals, 34.8% (8); and students who preferred another learning activity, 19.2% (5). Responses ranged from, "it's fun because you get to really tell about what you learned or if you learned anything" to, "it's boring and we shouldn't do it very often," and "it helps me a little bit, but I learn more when we just talk about it out loud."

Seventh-Grade Social Studies Class

The seventh-grade social studies teacher used low-structure journals and required the students to make at least three entries per week. In this case, the teacher posed no specific questions, but did require all students to write at a specified time and to relate the content of their journals to the subject matter. The journals of these students contain a lot of personal feeling. For example, students made such entries as, "I wish we could have learned something else today instead of spending so much time on Europe," and "today was fun and the homework was easy. It's fun to learn about all these people's cultures. We should play a game before the test to help us review for the test. Like in math, before a test we play challenge."

In this classroom where students wrote in low-structure journals, 83.1% gave positive responses on the attitude survey. The students in this class appeared to enjoy the experience of journal writing.

An analysis of the open-ended items reveals still further information about the attitudes of this class toward writing in content journals. Two categories emerged from, "The best thing about writing in content journals is..." The two categories were: expressing personal feelings, 43.4% (10),

and the opportunity to communicate with the teacher, 17.4% (4). Responses indicating personal feelings include, "you are able to express your feelings," and "sometimes it is easier to write down your problems than to say them and you get them off your chest." Two responses related to communication with the teacher are, "you get to say something you want to say to the teacher," and, "when you write back, I know that you are thinking, too."

Responses to the item, "The worst thing about writing in content journals is..." again were divided into two categories: writer's block, 30.4% (7), and dislike of writing 17.4% (4). Responses included such things as, "sometimes you don't know what to write," and, "it's boring and it's a waste of time."

Of the responses to the item, "My opinion about writing in content journals is..." 73.95% (17) were positive. One student wrote, "I think writing in a content journal is fun. You're able to express your feelings freely. It is sort of like having a Dear Agatha for your very own." Another child said, "that it is fun and you can learn about a lot of new things. Your teacher can get to know more about you, too."

Summary

The two classrooms of children in this study had differing opinions about the value of writing in content journals. The low-structure group was more positive than the high-structure group about the journals. However, over one-half of the students in the high-structure group did have positive responses about writing in journals. In addition, the high-structure group reported the value as something that enhanced learning while the low-structure group viewed journals as also providing an opportunity to express personal opinions. Both of these views support journal writing in middle school content areas.

We caution the reader to avoid making any judgments, on the basis of this study, about the preferred approach to content journal writing or making generalizations to other groups of students; we did not control for variables such as subject area, grade level, or teacher style. Further research is needed to determine the varied impact of content journal writing on students' attitudes and learning.

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Agree and Disagree Statements

1. I learn more about the subject when I write in a content journal.

2. There is nothing to be gained from writing in a content journal.

3. Writing in a content journal is dull.

4. I like to write in my content journal.

5. A teacher should not ask me to write in a content journal.

6. It is fun to write in a content journal.

7. I do not like to write in a content journal.

8. I am glad my teacher asks me to write in a content journal.

9. Writing in a content journal is boring.

10. Writing in a content journal is a good use of my time.